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Weekly Summary

Special Report

France: Concern About Military Unrest

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April 25, 1975

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FRANCE

**Concern About
Military Unrest**



For the first time since the Algerian war ended almost 15 years ago, discontent in the military has become a topic for grave concern in France. The streams of discontent flow mainly from inadequate military salaries, a failure to define the mission of the army in the defense of Europe, substandard living conditions, and changing social attitudes in France.

France has been particularly sensitive to the political role of the military since 1958 when the army played a significant part in the birth of the 5th Republic. At that time the country was faced with widespread revolt in the army over policy toward Algeria, and de Gaulle's return to power was seen as the only alternative to civil war. Ten years later, when student-labor disorders threatened to topple the government, the French public noted uneasily that President de Gaulle found it necessary to assure himself of the loyalty of the army before taking action. Most recently, French sensitivity has been heightened by the role of the Portuguese military, which has raised the question in French minds of whether the rumblings of discontent in the armed forces are the early warning of an attempt by the military to impose its own solution on France's current social and economic troubles.

During the past six months, the volume of press articles—by generals, journalists, and politicians—has made it impossible for the government to ignore the problem. President Giscard is proceeding cautiously, however, for the issue is a potentially explosive one, and his leftist opposition may have hopes of using it to try to embarrass, or even bring down, the government. At the same time, he is constrained by the high cost of meaningful reforms.



Demonstration at Draguignan

An Army, Cut-Rate

Since the Algerian war, Paris has poured money into its *force de dissuasion*—the strategic nuclear deterrent force that allows France to maintain its claim of military "independence." The high cost has been offset by extremely low salaries in the armed forces, especially for conscripts who are called up at the age of 18 or 19 for 12 months' service. Their salaries, though recently raised from roughly \$17 to \$50 a month, are still five times less than the French minimum wage. Officers and noncommissioned officers also earn far less than their civilian counterparts.

Eighty-six percent of conscript barracks were built before World War I, and 10 percent date from the Napoleonic wars—"without the honor of being named national monuments." Another important cause of malaise, particularly among the cadres, is the feeling of being cut off from French society. There is an increasing tendency on the part of the public to question the need for an expensive peacetime army, and the prestige of a military career is at a low ebb. Less than three candidates apply for every vacancy at the principal military academy, compared with 13 at the civil service - oriented National School of Administration. Meanwhile, the proportion of sons from military families who are accepted by the academies or given direct commissions is steadily growing—possibly an indication that the officer corps is feeding on itself, becoming ever more isolated from "outside" society.

Changing Society

The years of peace that followed France's disentanglement from its colonial imbrolios and the relaxation produced by detente have reduced the importance of the armed forces in the public's eye. Government emphasis on the strategic nuclear force has similarly served to make the conventional soldier seem redundant. At the same time, the gulf between the living standards of the

soldier and his civilian friends has widened dramatically.

The changing nature of society is also reflected in the new crop of conscripts, who are better educated and more sophisticated than their predecessors. They are also more politicized—two years ago, they were demonstrating in their high schools against the elimination of student deferments—and they have recently been enfranchised. An increasing number resent having to donate 12 months to the state—especially when that time is often wasted on menial and nonmilitary duties. Finally, the military is confronted with the fundamental problem of enforcing rigid discipline in an increasingly permissive society.

Military Protests

During the final round of the presidential election last May, a series of demands in the form of an open letter was sent to the two candidates, Giscard and Socialist leader Mitterrand. Originally signed by 100 conscripts and NCOs, the letter became known as the "Call of the 100." It was later signed—sometimes in a diluted form—by some 2,500 to 4,000 soldiers, including many stationed in West Germany.

The letter called for specific measures to ameliorate compulsory military service:

- free choice of date and place of induction between the ages of 18 and 25;
- right to form trade unions;
- pay equal to the minimum wage;
- free transportation.

A series of other demands was aimed at loosening the bonds of military protocol; eliminating military security, tribunals, and sanctions; and terminating conscript service outside of France.

Comments and queries on the contents of this publication are welcome. They may be directed to [REDACTED] of the Office of Current Intelligence, code 143, extension 7989.

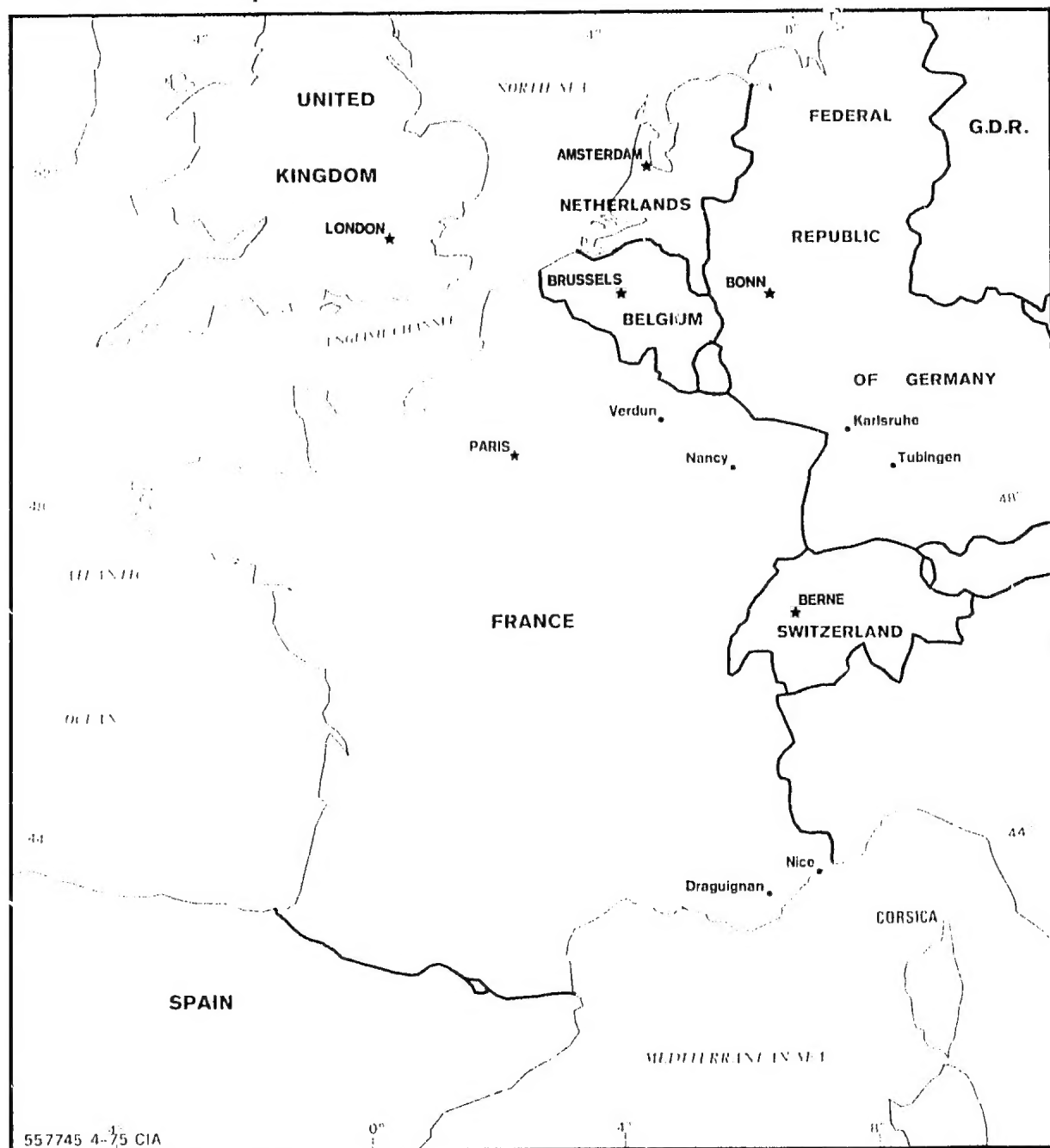
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Sites of Conscript Demonstrations



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This document may well represent the most serious challenge to French military institutions since the early years of the 5th Republic. The "Call of the 100" has become the manifesto of the draftee demonstrations that have taken place since last September in several French and West German cities.

The 200 draftees who broke out of their barracks last September 10 to march down the streets of Draguignan in southern France set a precedent for revolt against the previous system of protesting through proper military channels. Driven by what the French media has dubbed *le phenomene ras le bol*—military slang for "fed up to the back teeth"—they chanted slogans against army conditions and raised their fists in the salute of the extreme leftists. Among them were 30 blacks from France's overseas departments who also protested against racial discrimination in the barracks. The demonstration was orderly and ended without incident, but the chain reaction it set off is still rocking the French military establishment.

The Draguignan protest was quickly followed by incidents of insubordination in a battalion stationed in nearby Nice, and by a joint letter to the defense minister from 200 draftees and noncommissioned officers in Paris requesting a variety of reforms in line with the "Call of the 100."

On January 13, some 100 draftees assigned to units in Karlsruhe, West Germany, demonstrated against the living and working conditions in Germany. They also questioned the need for stationing French troops in Germany—the first time a political factor raised by the "Call of the 100" had been used in a demonstration. Two weeks later, another garrison in West Germany was affected when some 80 draftees in Tuebingen protested disciplinary actions taken against fellow conscripts.

In mid-February, about 150 draftees demonstrated in the streets of Verdun, demanding a civilian inquiry into the accidental death of a conscript. A day later, some 100 draftees met in

Nancy for a clandestine press conference with the leader of the Young Communists.

The demonstrations so far have all been orderly. They have not attacked the concept of compulsory military service, but have concentrated on demands for more pay, better living conditions, and fewer restrictions.

Influence of the Left

The military leadership has blamed leftist agitation for the unrest in the barracks. This charge was emphasized by Prime Minister Chirac during his trip to Moscow last month, when he accused the French Communist Party of undermining national defenses. In fact, there is no evidence to support the contention that the party is behind the military malaise. The Communists and the Socialists have not taken a firm stand on defense issues. Extreme leftist splinter groups, however, have been active among the military.

The anti-militarist image formerly associated with the left in France has become an embarrassment for the Socialist Party. In a confidential note last January, Socialist chief Mitterrand warned his party members not to associate themselves with purely anti-militarist demonstrations "which could only rebound to hurt the left." One of the reasons for the Socialist change of heart is reflected in polls showing that over 50 percent of the military officers and NCOs voted for Mitterrand in the last presidential election. Nevertheless, Socialist action has been limited to issuing a 20-point program aimed at improving material conditions and morale in the barracks.

The Communist propaganda efforts that are aimed at the armed forces appear to be primarily defensive—to ensure that the army will not interfere should a leftist government come to power. But the Communists are also worried about being "passed on the left" by extremists active among the armed forces. The French Communists' propaganda tries to counter the appeal of more radical leftist groups by building strict discipline among the party's military members and by emphasizing the necessity for wide-ranging reforms. Many Communist draftees signed the

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General Marcel Bigeard

"Call of the 100" but they have steered clear of radical "soldiers' committees" and have not been conspicuous in the demonstrations. As the new secretary of state for defense, General Bigeard, recently remarked, "Communist soldiers are always well behaved and disciplined. If one day there were a Communist defense ministry, there would be no more street marches."

There is some evidence that the Young Communists are stepping up their activities in an effort to avoid being left in the dust of radical left splinter groups. The draftee demonstration and news conference in Nancy in mid-February was "sponsored" by the leader of the Young Communists. Defense Minister Bourges, who has seized every opportunity to blame the Communists for the military troubles, immediately denounced the party as the instigator of the demonstration.

The Socialist "National Convention of Reserve Cadres for the New Army" and the Communist "Federation of Officers and NCOs of the Republican Reserve" compete to enroll members of the officer corps. To date, their influence has been small and has been confined largely to lower ranking reserve NCOs. Senior NCOs and officers, who consider themselves members of professional cadres and identify with the French bourgeoisie, so far have not been as susceptible as the draftees to the proletarian solidarity approach of the left.

Soldiers' Committees

French military security forces link the formation of soldiers' committees to the presence of soldiers belonging to the Trotskyite Communist Revolutionary League (formerly the Communist Revolutionary Front), the Marxist Revolutionary Alliance, the Anti-militarist Committee, and other leftist splinter groups. Security crack-downs and the splitting up of groups of known sympathizers had severely curtailed the activities of these organizations until the "Call of the 100" which embodied many of the demands made by the soldiers' committees--gave the movement new impetus.

France's most respected newspaper, *Le Monde*, conducted a survey among soldiers in late January. The newspaper concluded that the Trotskyite Revolutionary League was heavily involved in focusing the attention of draftees on "legitimate grievances," thereby drawing the draftees into soldiers' committees. Soldiers interviewed pointed out that even though one of the three leaders of the initial demonstration at Draguignan was connected with the Trotskyites, he had not hidden this fact. The soldiers emphasized, however, that even though some of the demonstrations may have been "encouraged" by Trotskyites it would be a grave mistake to assume that draftees' grievances were contrived.

Government Response Siuggish

In early December a report on army morale prepared by the army's then chief of staff, Alain de Boissieu, was leaked to the press. His report was apparently initiated as a result of the

incident at Draguignan. De Boissieu urged that conditions in the military be improved and suggested a revision of missions to adapt the French army to its financial means. According to *Le Monde*, the memorandum conceded that morale had become a serious problem and even intimated that, should French society suffer another upheaval like that of May 1968, the army might not escape involvement. The words "May 1968," and the specter of army involvement in a student-labor confrontation with the government, evoked a strong negative emotional response from the French public.

The Council of Defense met on December 18 and announced that the basic statute governing officers and NCOs would be studied and revised. The new laws would provide for quicker promotion and would encourage younger cadres. The results of the study, incorporating suggestions made by all ranks of officers, were submitted to the defense minister in early April and will be hammered into a new statute to go before the Council of Defense. The report calls for the division of all officer grades into three groups: junior officers up to captains, commandants up to lieutenant colonels, and colonels and above—within which promotion would be automatic. An age limit would be established for promotion into these major "groups." Military purists in France are already decrying the new proposals as a minor revolution that will create a whole category of short-term officers, changing the army from a way of life to a vocation.

In early January, the military trial of one black and two white leaders of the demonstration at Draguignan once again focused public attention on conscript grievances. Thousands of leftist civilians demonstrated in Paris and Marseilles in support of the defendants, and the Socialist and Communist parties declared their solidarity with the draftees. The black draftee was acquitted—"proving there is no racial prejudice in the army," as one French news magazine drily remarked—and the other two received token sentences. The verdicts were lenient enough to deter strong reactions, but on the whole the army suffered from the exposure given to anti-militarist propaganda.



French draftees in Karlsruhe barracks

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At the end of January, Giscard replaced Defense Minister Soufflet, who had not been effective and, moreover, was identified in the public mind with the government's inadequate response to military discontent. Yvon Bourges, a dynamic civil servant and staunch Gaullist, became the new minister. Giscard also filled the vacant secretary of state for defense slot by appointing a colorful and controversial paratroop general, Marcel Bigeard.

Bigeard will be a key figure in the government's attempt to cope with the military. He may well be the best man for shaking the army out of its torpor. Bigeard rose through the ranks and survived the bloodiest fighting of the French colonial wars to become one of France's most decorated soldiers. Though worshipped by the men in his command, he is regarded with some suspicion by the high command because of his unorthodox methods and his well-publicized irreverence for other generals.

The first indication that Bourges and Bigeard were coming to grips with the military problem came on March 4 when the cabinet announced several new measures aimed at improving morale in the armed forces. Among these, conscripts were to be allotted one free trip home per month, and their pay was tripled to 210 francs (about \$50)—still one of the lowest salaries in NATO. Bourges has also opted to retain the Permanent Military Service Council set up by Soufflet shortly before his resignation. The council—composed of military, parliamentary, and private members—is empowered to investigate and report on all aspects of military service. Bigeard has called for a more flexible code of discipline, but no action has yet been taken.

Giscard has promised further reforms and has emphasized the necessity for reintegrating the military into the mainstream of French life. In his March "fireside chat" to the nation, he also stressed the importance of the conventional forces. Drawing attention to the explosive nature of world crises today, he called for a more mobile and flexible army capable of defending French interests anywhere in the world at a moment's notice.

Meaningful Reforms Expensive 25X1X4

In the current economic climate it will be very difficult to expand the military budget. Prime Minister Chirac supports the Defense Ministry's appeal for more funds, but [REDACTED] Giscard and his finance minister oppose any increase in military spending. 25X1X4

Barring a real increase in funds for the defense budget, further increases in personnel expenditures will have to come at the expense of weapons development and procurement, or through reduced combat preparedness standards. Already, the completion of a third group of IRBM silos has reportedly been canceled for budgetary reasons, and the air force has been forced to reduce both flying time and the number of bases for its strategic bomber force.

Alternatively, Paris may choose to reduce the size of its forces in order to arrest the rising imbalance between personnel costs and force development and readiness. The US embassy reports that Paris is already asking itself if it can continue to afford a half-million-man defense force. US officials indicate that increasing personnel costs, coupled with the absence of a shooting war, could compel Giscard's government to reduce the armed forces to 300,000 or 400,000 men.

The most likely political solution in the short term is a program of conventional "reforms" designed to make the existing system more palatable. In the long term, however, France will have to come to grips with the basic question of whether to increase defense spending or accept a reduced role as a world power.

Meanwhile, the demonstrations will continue, and the military, especially the lower ranks, will remain a fertile field for leftist exploitation. Unless the promised "further reforms" come quickly, the conscripts could become more disorderly. Officers and senior NCOs, however, remain firmly committed to the existing system, and there does not appear to be any imminent danger of the French military pushing for a voice in French politics or participating to any significant degree in a major civil disturbance. (SECRET NO FOREIGN DISSEM)